

# **follow your inner moonlight, don't hide the madness** **by allesvalyrian**

**Category:** Stranger Things, 2016

**Genre:** Adventure, Sci-Fi

**Language:** English

**Characters:** Jonathan B., Mike W., Nancy W., Steve H.

**Pairings:** Jonathan B./Nancy W.

**Status:** In-Progress

**Published:** 2019-07-17 07:36:49

**Updated:** 2019-07-19 11:38:42

**Packaged:** 2019-12-12 19:04:01

**Rating:** M

**Chapters:** 2

**Words:** 7,927

**Publisher:** [www.fanfiction.net](http://www.fanfiction.net)

**Summary:** Everyone at Hawkins claims the past is in the past, that everything from last year should be forgotten about. To Nancy and the Byers friends and family, that can't be possible. You can't forget about the dead when they are still alive.

## 1. NANCY I

Music never used to make Nancy feel dizzy, nor trapped like she was now. It was pounding in her ears like her insides were drums and the lyrics were beating against her, pushing every organ and muscle sideways while she struggled to stray away. Through the stream of partygoers, the Wheeler sister had to navigate through with casual shoves and pushes. This was just to get to the counter where the drinks were, barely a few feet from where she was before.

At the table, Nancy noticed a bowl of some sort of drink. She was tired and thirsty, needing something to hydrate her system. "What's in this?" she asked a man downing some liquid in a solo cup. He turned towards her, eyes nearly blank in a drunken state, and belched.

"Best shit in the house." His voice was slurred, and Nancy watched quizzically as the man sauntered away, swaying with each and every step he took.

Though curiosity did fuel her, it was more her desire to drink that made her grab a cup and fill it with whatever liquid was in the bowl. As soon as it hit her tongue, her eyes shut forcefully from a bitter sting. In the few seconds that passed, she didn't realize she took more than one sip and finished the cup. "Nance?"

She turned sharply, not expecting the figure in front of her to be scowling as he was. The Wheeler inhaled a breath, seeing his expression morph from confusion to annoyance. "Where have you been?" Steve asked, his body seemingly larger in the light he stood under. Nancy felt like she was shrinking, growing smaller like some character from *Alice in Wonderland*. "I've been looking everywhere for you."

*Everywhere?* It came to her as a surprise. If Steve really looked everywhere as he said, she should have been easy to find. They came to the party together, and the only reason they separated was due to Nancy not wanting to watch her boyfriend play beer pong with the other drunkards. If she was being honest, Nancy didn't want to be at the party in the first place. Prom was tomorrow, and she didn't want to be sick that day, but Steve had insisted.

*"Come on, Nance. It'll be fun. Relax, nobody will get drunk. It's just a... social gathering before prom. All the seniors will be there."*

It felt weird, her in some stranger's house with a bunch of kids older than her. Nobody she knew was there, most likely because it was Senior Prom, not for juniors like herself. She was only going because Steve was her boyfriend, and it would be odd to not go with him.

"I've been right here," she admitted slowly. Only after one drink, Nancy could hear her voice growing slower and softer. "What's in this?" she asked again.

Steve reached his hand out, grabbing her own. "You shouldn't be drinking this," he asserted. "It's not good for you."

"Fuck off, Steve." Healthy or not, the taste was growing on Nancy as soon as she took a few more sips. "I'm thirsty." She reached her hand back into the bowl, dragging the cup inside to refill. Steve's grip grew tighter around her wrist.

"Nancy." She winced, still holding onto the cup, but met his gaze. "Don't drink anymore." What was his problem? Steve loved when Nancy did rebellious things, and she had a beer with him before. Surely alcohol or... whatever the hell was inside of the bowl was fine.

His grip was strong, and even while wiggling her arm it still wouldn't escape. People were continuing to dance and talk, but a few eyes had wandered onto the pair. "Let go of my wrist, Steve." At this point, her voice was still quiet but louder than before. More assertive, commanding. A new Nancy seemed to come with the drink. "Now."

Maybe he realized how much it hurt her, or maybe it was just because of the growing stares. Steve let go of her wrist, his eyes softening just a little bit. "How many drinks did you have?"

"One," she said smugly. A small smirk came to her face. "And I'm already drunk."

"Jesus Christ," Steve hissed to himself. Nancy turned to walk away, but Steve grabbed her shoulders and steered her towards the other direction. "I'm taking you to the bathroom."

Nancy grumbled, pushing herself away from him. "Stop pushing me," she grunted, letting her hands slap needlessly at his own. Steve was becoming perturbed, as if he already wasn't before, and gave her a harsh shove away from the partygoers and into the bathroom hallway, where she finally decided to walk for herself — albeit stumbling — into the room.

Sitting on the toilet lid, Nancy watched as Steve turned on the faucet and cooled his hands with the running water. "You shouldn't be drinkin' that stuff. It's illegal."

"Illegal for you too," she mumbled. Her fingers were tingling, and Nancy was more interested in them than on her boyfriend. "I'm only a year younger than you."

"I don't want you to get in trouble." He ran his fingers through his hair, dripping with cool water, and turned to her. "Things can get a lot worse for me then."

Nancy stiffened, her eyes raising slightly while her lips parted in disgust. "For *you*?" As she started to piece everything together — who Steve really was, what would happen if she were to get in trouble — Nancy's eyes couldn't help but roll. She even let out a sigh of a chuckle, the joke being that she believed Steve was a decent guy.

He didn't seem to think anything was wrong. "For me and for you."

"God, Steve," she exhaled quickly, "you're such a dick."

"What?"

Nancy's mind was spinning, and she was starting to realize it maybe wasn't just the drink that was making her as she was. "I thought you were some... misjudged jock I could change if we dated. Like I could make you a better person."

"And you have!" he exclaimed quickly, rushing to grasp her shoulders. They were wet, and some water seeped through her thin cotton blouse and onto her skin, making Nancy quirk up an eyebrow in annoyance. "Because of you, I actually do work and study. That's gotta be something," he said, "right?"

Steve had a good heart, Nancy could always tell that, but it wasn't her that was going to break it free from a cage of societal norms and popularity pressure. Someone stronger than herself could do it, maybe. "I can't help you anymore, Steve." There was a burning feeling somewhere on her face, but her senses were all merging into one and Nancy couldn't tell the source. "I thought I loved you. I... I thought I was good to you."

"Nance-"

"I can't keep this going," she whispered, almost regretful. "I can't keep being with you."

Steve was quiet for a moment, and Nancy could feel some form of regret bubbling in her chest. Or maybe it was just the bile in her stomach building up. "Are you breaking up with me? The day before prom?"

Her actions sounded horrible coming from his mouth, and Nancy couldn't reply. If she agreed, she'd sound like more of an asshole than she already was. Besides, she was too nauseous to really concentrate, keeping a hand on her stomach as she slowly slid off the lid and lifted it. *Just in case.*

The background music of the party was dying down and her mind was starting to spin. She hadn't realized Steve left the room until the door slammed shut behind him. The sudden feeling of vomiting was overwhelming her, head spinning in circles like it were some kind of carousel. Nancy leaned her head over the toilet instinctively, the only thoughts in her head being that she was alone, in a bathroom, vomiting while prom is just a day away.

It was only nine fifty-two at night when she left the party. She was staggering and reeked of vomit and sweat, and people parted ways for her to reach the door. Steve had driven her to the house, and Nancy was startled to not see his car parked among the others. *Fuck*, she thought as her eyes closed in brief irritation. *He left.*

To make matters worse, Nancy could feel some cold substance land on her skin, and she groaned with her hands placed upon her head. It was raining, of course, on the one night she had to walk home

because she dumped her boyfriend. The timing was impeccable.

Nancy was grateful Hawkins was a small town, and also lucky she knew some of the neighbors of the party host. Mister and Miss Miller, a quiet and frail elderly couple, had been friends with Nancy's Nana, her mother's mom. They sometimes invited her over to their house, so when she came knocking on their door dripping wet, they were quick to usher her inside and wrap her in a pale towel.

"Nancy, dear," Miss Miller said slowly, "why are you out so late? You're soaked!"

She knew whatever she told the woman, they would tell her mom when they called her. "I was at my friend's house." She tried to think of which friend she threw under the bus to her mom. *Carol? Abigail? Liz?* "Jess." She didn't live around this neighborhood, but surely the Millers didn't know every neighbor in the area.

"And you left?" Mister Miller questioned. Nancy was growing annoyed with all their questions. She just wanted to go home and sleep.

"I wasn't sleeping over, just going to hang out. Everyone else left, but my friend was supposed to drive me back and she forgot she had to... do something else."

The elders looked at each other quizzically. "At ten at night?"

Nancy closed her eyes, ready to let her anger loose and just scream. "Can you please call my mom to pick me up here?"

Miss Miller nodded, making short steps over to the hanging telephone where she dialed a familiar number and let the line ring. As Nancy's mother finally got on the line, or so she assumed because Miss Miller was talking, the teen wrapped the towel tighter around her body. Her world was spinning less than before, it was already after the vomiting, but she was so tired. Nancy didn't have any tests tomorrow, probably because it was prom, but school was still important nonetheless.

It took around a half-hour for Karen to pull into the driveway, Nancy

leaving the Miller household gratefully and drier than before. Her hair was cold against her skin, still slightly dripping icy raindrops onto her neck. She knew before she got into the car that her mother was going to yell, and Nancy didn't think she could bear it. After everything that happened at the party, with Steve, the vomit, the music, she could break down at any moment.

"Nancy Wheeler!" her mother shouted immediately as she swung the passenger door open. "You lie to me about going to Jess's house, you go to a *party*, and then you show up at the Millers' doorstep for shelter in the rain?" *How does she know about the party?*

Her mother seemed to read her thoughts, turning her attention just a few feet to the left and glancing over at the brightly-lit, music-blasting house with kids jumping and shouting profanity. Karen quirked an eyebrow, daring Nancy to utter a response. She wasn't in the mood, closing her door shut while making no sounds. With that, her mother pressed the gas pedal and sped off back to the Wheeler household.

"You better have a good excuse," she muttered under her breath. "I'd just *love* to hear why my daughter snuck off to a high school party. And-" Karen paused, inhaling. "Nancy! Were you drinking alcohol?" Her voice raised higher than before, definitely embarrassed by her daughter's actions.

Nancy had to lie. It was the only way she could possibly live in her house again. "I didn't," she admitted with a low voice, "I was just around a bunch of kids that were." She looked over but still couldn't force eye contact with Karen. "I promise."

It got quiet in the car, and maybe it was just the pressure building up on Nancy from the silence that made her crack. She *needed* to break down, to cry and sob and share all her regrets to someone. It was impossible to hide it forever, especially keep it away from her own mother. "I broke up with Steve."

"Oh," her mother sighed. Nancy noticed her white-knuckled grip loosen on the steering wheel, and perhaps it made her feel sympathy for her daughter. "I'm sorry, honey."

"It was a day before prom," she muttered. Nancy felt more than one tear fall from her eyes and used her wrist to wipe them away from her face. "I can't go now."

Her mom was silent for a moment, unsure of what to say. Maybe she was just thinking, or perhaps she knew silence was the best way to crack Nancy and let everything come pouring out. It seemed to work well. "I don't know what to do, mom. I can't go to prom, school tomorrow is going to be just a disaster, and... and..." She let out a small hiccup, her walls shattering just at that moment and let a river of tears free. Karen kept quiet, turning right and into the Wheeler driveway.

Nancy left the car herself, feeling the puffiness of her eyes as she entered the dimly-lit kitchen. Mike and her little sister, as well as her dad most likely, were sleeping. It was hard to keep quiet, especially when she was still slightly staggering, but her mom helped her to the table where she sat and placed her head in her hands.

Karen slid something, a flyer, over to her. "I found this at the library," she admitted. "I was interested, but I think you'd like it more than I." Nancy peeked her eyes out from her hands, examining the flyer cautiously. *Poetry Slam*. She didn't care at all about poetry, not one bit.

"I know you like writing." Her mom held one hand on the table, the other on her waist. "Even though it's poems, I think you might like it. Besides, it gives you something to do rather than sulk and mope around the house."

Both women let out a small chuckle, Nancy's being quiet and pathetic while Karen's was louder and comforting. She didn't reply to her mother but did take the flyer into her room with her as she dragged her fatigued body up the stairs, careful not to be too loud to wake her sleeping family.

She grabbed a long-sleeved nightgown from a drawer, though Nancy couldn't really tell the color in the dark, and dragged herself to the bathroom just after tossing the paper flyer onto her bed. She dressed into her pajamas and brushed her teeth, staring at her exhausted reflection in the mirror.



In her mind, she thought she could see the lights flicker, but perhaps it was just her dreams seeping into reality from sleep deprivation. Nancy turned away, opening the door quickly and leaving to go into her bed.

The flyer was laid upon the blankets, staring back at her as if some sort of animate object. It ran through her thoughts, the back of her mind. *Maybe I should go*, it said to her, acting as if she were thinking it. *Maybe it will be fun*. It was doing a damn good job of convincing, but Nancy was still remiss to the idea. She could have a girl's night in, or watch a movie by herself. Poetry was stupid anyway. *You love English*.

Nancy placed the flyer on her dresser, the words *Poetry Slam* still being visible in her head. Her head fell onto a pillow, shut painfully as the burning feeling from crying stung upon her face. Dried tears chipped and cracked off her skin once they made contact with the pillow as Nancy tried to sleep, but somehow her thoughts were swarming too much in her mind. *Poetry. Steve. Prom. School. Poetry. Poetry. Poetry!*

Her eyes shut, but she couldn't sleep, and so Nancy remained up all night in thinking.

It was ten forty-eight.

Though her eyes would shift from open to closed every few minutes that night, barely letting her sleep, Nancy still got out of bed at a normal time for school. She showered in the morning, as usual, and the water did feel nice on her fatigued body. Cramps she hadn't realized were there suddenly stung under the shower head, but the stench of alcohol and sweat were going away. The Wheeler had already picked out an outfit to wear on the day of prom a week ago, and so she put it on hesitantly. It would be weird, to come to school dressed so nicely while she wasn't even going to the prom anymore.

Dragging herself down the stairs, she wasn't surprised to see bed-headed Mike scarfing down a stack of pancakes. Nancy rolled her eyes, and her younger brother took notice with quirked brows. A signature Wheeler trait.

"You look like you were rolled over by a truck." Mike let a ghost of a smile whisk over his lips, taunting his older sister to retort with a sly comment back. Their mother was right at the counter, and both siblings glanced over to her ever so quickly.

"I didn't realize you kept a bird in your hair." Nancy took a seat at the chair opposite Mike's, and the boy scowled. Karen, who was in the process of writing something, didn't care to interrupt their quarrel. "What kind is it? A vulture? Sure smells like it."

Karen turned her head. "Nancy." Mike grinned at their mother's response to his sister, while the older sibling stuck her tongue out in defense. A plate of pancakes similar to the ones Mike ate was placed at her seat, and Nancy began to eat them. Her stomach was craving food, she could hear it grumbling all through the night, but she was far too tired to get up and get something herself. She reached over to grab the syrup, placing only a little on her pancakes. Mike usually drowns his, which Nancy commonly mocks.

It took only a few minutes to finish the two pancakes, but Nancy was thankful. The food seemed to settle her stomach for the morning and, hopefully, long enough to last the whole day. She grabbed her bag, took her mom's car keys, and waved goodbye to her family in the room. Her mom looked back, rushing over before Nancy could leave the house.

"Wait!" she exclaimed, doing a light jog over to the door. Nancy watched as she stopped, placing her hands on her shoulders. "Are you going tonight? To the Poetry Slam?"

She thought about it while awake, and it seemed better than nothing. With a slight nod, her mother nodded. "Don't lie to me, alright? You drive back home right after, got it?"

Nancy nodded again, closing her eyes just to let them roll a slight bit. Her mother was still annoyed with her about going to the party, but it seemed after she told her about Steve the punishment and reprimanding were less intense.

The door was already ajar from when Nancy tried leaving before, and so she stepped out and shut it quickly behind her. Stepping into the

car, she placed her bag on the passenger's seat next to her. There was something she was looking for, making sure it was inside.

The Wheeler unzipped the top pocket, looking directly into the open area. Right at the top was the Poetry Slam flyer, perfectly placed so she could see it.

A smile came to her face, which she didn't think would happen at the sight of a poetry event. Nancy carefully zipped the bag back up, making sure the paper didn't rip. She placed the keys into the engine, starting the car, and began her drive off to school.

*Today will be good*, she thought to herself. Cyndi Lauper played from the car stereo, and Nancy had to turn down the music to keep her thoughts from straying to last night. *No Steve*.

*No more Steve.*

## 2. NANCY II

Every day Nancy pulled into the school lot and stared for a few minutes at the two posters that hung beside the double doors. One was the image of a small, almost shy-looking kid who died just last year. The one next to it commemorated her own best friend, Barbara "Barb" Holland, who disappeared a similar time of the other boy.

Will Byers's body was found in a lake, dead, but Barb has never been seen again. Nancy always felt guilty for her death because they were at the same party that night, the one where she vanished. Of course, Nancy and Steve were up in his bedroom while Barb remained by the poolside, prey to an unexpected predator.

Her eyes felt dry as they glanced over the posters that day. Steve normally swung by, draping his arm around her shoulders and guiding her out of a daze, but today he didn't. She wasn't *mad* at him, for God's sake she broke up with the man, but it made her realize what a challenge it was to tear herself away and focus on school.

The only reason she did so was when someone bumped into her shoulder.

Nancy glanced over, her eyes starting from their head and falling to their feet. A man, curled hair and tendons that seemed to pop out from his neck. Sunglasses mounted his face, hanging low on his nose just so that his eyes could peer over them. They didn't exchange any words, but it felt slow as the man turned and whisked away into the crowd of students.

He wasn't familiar to her, and Nancy had to assume he was a new student. She knew the majority of her own class and, from Steve, she had gotten accustomed to the seniors as well. Hawkins wasn't a big school, and Nancy could pinpoint an underclassman from an upperclassman any day.

"Little Miss Heartbreaker!" called a voice from a distance. Nancy only could assume it was meant for her, considering the tone sounded familiar. "Did you hear? Stevie's got himself a new girlfriend for the prom!"

That made her head spin back. Steve was already onto another girl? It didn't surprise her much considering his status just last year, but he always told Nancy that she was special. He even seemed heartbroken when she drunkenly broke up with him at the party. To most, he would have sauntered off and scooped up another woman on his way out, but Nancy?

She thought she was better than them.

It took all her willpower not to march up to the man, Tommy H., and chastise him for such a ridiculous comment. With a sharp inhale, refusing to glance over, she made her way into the school building with her nose pointed up, a sudden surge of confidence running through her blood.

She didn't need Steve at all. He didn't have to help her through the halls, walk her to class, or even kiss her before she entered the room. Nancy didn't miss it one bit.

Well, maybe she did. The feeling of warmth on her side as she walked, almost as if she were the knight and he was her shield. Her brother's nerdy games were getting to her head, but with Steve, it felt like a fantasy. A dream come true. He was her guardian.

Nancy entered her first class, math, and took her seat. While she was normally quite focused, her mind kept playing flashes of Barb and their memories together. The teacher was going over some new problem set but Nancy just couldn't concentrate. Her eyes were glazed over as the chalk scratched against the blackboard. Its creaks and groans made her tense, shivers running down her spine as they cowered from the sound.

There were whispers from the desks behind her, people laughing and giggling under their breaths. Nancy had a suspicious feeling they were about her and Steve, considering how quickly gossip spread around the school. Her ears held a pinkish tint at the tips, embarrassment creeping on her shoulders, and Nancy tried to focus more on the lecture at hand than the suddenly hilarious comments behind her.

The day dragged on as so until the last bell rang, and she was free to

drive home. The Poetry Slam started at six, and she had time to dress in nicer clothes than jeans and a red cardigan. Nancy stepped into her car, avoiding as many glares as possible before pulling out of the school and driving away.

She hadn't seen Steve all day, which came to her surprise. In fact, she thought that everywhere she went she'd see her ex-boyfriend, especially after that comment Tommy made to her in the morning. It was odd that she'd managed to avoid him, without even really trying. Nancy thought about it until she pulled into the driveway of her house, watching as the light breeze tipped the trees down, bending them to its will.

Fumbling with the keys as she exited the car, Nancy carried her bag into the house and settled it by the door. She could care less about her homework now; the Poetry Slam was just three hours away and she always had to be at least fifteen minutes early to the event. Nancy dragged herself up the stairs, readying herself to change into a nicer outfit than what she normally wore to school.

It was a purple blouse, she remembered, and leggings. Her hair didn't quite rock the look she was hoping for (*Maybe I should get a perm. Like Madonna.*) but it still looked fine as she stood by the mirror. It didn't scream "hipster", like she was sure the others at the library would be, but it made Nancy feel thrilled. It was strange, being more nervous to go to a poetry slam than when she was going to prom.

That was odd.

She wanted to go to *this*, a Poetry Slam she hadn't cared about until the day of, rather than *prom*. She would have been a junior going with one of the most well-respected kids in the school. It made Nancy quirk her brows as she stood in front of the mirror, scanning herself as if the answer would fall in front of her. Why was she like this?

The room was starting to feel cold. Maybe it was because she was just standing there silently, or perhaps the universe or otherworldly force was telling her to hurry up. It didn't take long for the clock to reach five-forty, which marked Nancy's time of leave.

She didn't have a poem of her own but did bring her copy of *Howl*

*and Other Poems* by Allen Ginsburg. He was a favorite of hers, and perhaps if she had to, she could read one of his lines from the collection.

It only took her a few minutes to get to the library, and Nancy was surprised to see as many cars as she did park in the lot. She didn't really think many people would be interested in coming to a library-run poetry event, but then again, she was there, so it wasn't *totally* abnormal.

As she stepped out of the car, she noticed most of the people were middle-aged women, quite like her mother. It felt out of place, being there with them, but at this point it didn't matter. Nancy was going inside, whether she felt odd or not. *This will be fun*, praised her mind confidently. After taking a few steps towards the door, it changed to, *this will be good for you*.

Nancy didn't know what slam poetry really was, or how the library was even going to run it, but she did feel odd carrying in her book while everyone else laughed with nothing in their hands. No props, no writing, no nothing.

*Fuck.*

She glanced to her right at the sign for the event. Maybe the flyer said it as well, but Nancy probably looked over it in her tired daze. *Act out your poems from memory! Our judges will score you and the winner will receive a gift basket, including a brand new Walkman.*

Well, she wasn't winning. She wasn't even going to participate, but it seems now she has to. Everyone else attending the event is going to perform something, but Nancy didn't have anything prepared. There was an empty seat, a foldable chair, and Nancy took it quickly. In her book, she frantically ran over lines to try and memorize them, hoping it would at least be *something* for the judges to score.

She was a competitive person, Nancy Wheeler. Even though poetry wasn't her favorite thing, she was driven on winning.

There was a group of women sitting behind her, talking amongst themselves. Nancy didn't bother them, but her ears did pick up on

some of their comments. None of them were nasty. "Is that boy coming today?"

"Joyce Byers's kid?" one responded. Nancy felt a chill run down her neck, and without turning focused her attention more on their conversation than the poem she was trying to memorize.

The third woman finally commented. "Jonathan." *Shit. Shit. Shit.*

Jonathan Byers was the oldest son of the Byers family, whose youngest child Will had vanished a year ago. This was just a few days before the disappearance of Barb, which always made Nancy question the connection between the two cases.

To most people, Jonathan was a creepy and brooding man who didn't have any friends. Nancy tended to favor the thought that he may just be misjudged, but never personally wanted to speak to him. After his brother's vanishing, he began to be even more ridiculed than before. With the posters he hung up, and the camera he always hung around his neck, too many kids at Hawkins High were afraid of him.

But now he's coming to a place where Nancy can't be pressured by the other kids at school. Perhaps, if she doesn't shy away the moment her eyes meet his, she can learn more about him. Maybe she can be his first friend if he didn't have one already that most didn't know about.

"His poem was very nice last time," the first woman stated wistfully. "I wish I could write like that."

"I'm sure the boy has a lot going on in his head, with the death of his brother and all."

"Margaret! Stop that!"

Nancy grimaced slightly in her seat, closing the book in her lap. She wasn't going to get much else done if all she could do was sit and listen to women gossip behind her. Glancing down at her wrist, her mother's pale watch reflecting the light from the ceiling, Nancy could tell the poetry slam was about to start soon.

And so, the library doors opened, and the face of the isolated high



schooler entered the building. The women behind Nancy mumbled quietly to themselves, either bragging that they were correct or criticizing his fashion choices. She didn't think he took notice of her as he walked past her row of chairs, taking a seat at the far end of one a few chairs in front of her.

She let out a breath she hadn't realized she held. Why was she suddenly nervous? Was it because it was another kid from her school, and maybe now she could have even more gossip spread about her in the halls?

*No, Nancy.* It wasn't like her to get so worked up about one kid. Besides, he was an outcast in school. It wasn't like he would go to his friends and talk all about Nancy's failed slam poetry. He didn't *talk* to anyone, or so she knew.

A lady, the librarian Nancy knew just a bit about, stood in front of the chairs and held a microphone in her hand. The wire trailed down to a small box on the floor, where her voice projected quite loudly. Nancy had to grimace slightly, the noise causing her ears to ring. It all reminded her of the party just last night, with the music that tumbled in her ears.

"Thank you all for coming tonight," she said in her "please-be-quiet-or-else" voice that all librarians had. "We seem to have a slightly larger crowd today."

Nancy leaned back in her seat, hoping the woman was just making a general statement and wasn't going to have everyone look towards her. Jonathan, from his seat at a distance from hers, didn't look back. She was thankful for that.

"Our judges for tonight will be me, Ms. Clark, and Mr. Johnson. To all our new faces, we would just like to explain the rules before we begin.

"No props, scripts, or other items are allowed with you on the stage. This is slam poetry, as I always say, not a play." A few laughs filled the crowd, mostly from the women. "We ask that you keep these performances to a maximum of two minutes. We don't want to be here all night, as much as I love hearing your poems."

Nancy looked over once more at Jonathan, who was slightly leaning back in his seat. It was odd seeing him so comfortable, not hunched down slightly. He still wore an outfit he'd commonly don at school, a black jacket with jeans, but the teen looked much friendlier here than he did in the halls of Hawkins High.

She glanced back towards the librarian, her head turning so quick she thought her face had flushed red from embarrassment.

"The judges will score your performance out of ten, and the winner of tonight will get a gift basket. The special prize for tonight in this basket will be a Walkman, courtesy of Mr. Johnson who works at RadioShack." The balding man waved his hand from the front row of chairs, acknowledging that he, in fact, was the man responsible for the most valued object in the gift.

The librarian glanced over, chuckling at his movements. "Would anyone like to go first? If not, we will just have to choose ourselves."

Nancy tried to lower herself in the seat, hoping that someone else would eagerly raise their hand and beg to go on stage first. There was no way she was winning the prize, not after she failed to even memorize a paragraph, but maybe as someone else was going she could try and remember her lines.

"Jonathan Byers," the librarian said sweetly, "thank you for volunteering."

Oh, God.

Nancy tensed, which was slightly awkward in her lowered position. The one person she didn't want to go, because she didn't want him to *see* her, just had to volunteer first. Of course, she wasn't going to get anything done.

And Nancy still felt sympathetic for the boy. He lost his brother, just how she had lost Barb. It was evident he was still in grief, especially with the dark bags hanging under his eyes. She still mourned the loss of her best friend, but it must have been even harder for him. Losing a friend is difficult, but she wasn't raised with Barbara. Jonathan, unfortunately, had to deal with the loss of his own brother.

Nancy knew Will from when he hung out with Mike, but she didn't know him as well as Jonathan did. He was a good kid, kind and shy and a little bit awkward, but nonetheless intelligent. Though Jonathan occasionally came by to pick his brother up, Nancy didn't know him very well either. He normally just came to the door and Will came running out to him.

As he stepped to the front of the room, the two made eye contact for a split second. Nancy felt odd, seeing another kid from her school on the stage. One that she didn't even know very well. Still, she felt strange. A pink flush came to her face as he looked away, clearing his throat with a quick cough before he recited his poem.

"This isn't mine," he said in his low voice. Nancy never heard him talk before, and strangely enough, the sound was pleasing to her ears. It fit his looks, somewhat brooding, but it held a calmness that Nancy didn't think would soothe her.

And yet, it did.

"I found it from a poem called *Howl*. It's by Allen Ginsburg."

Nancy glanced down at the book in her lap, eyes widening slightly. *Fuck. Fuck.* The situation was awkward to begin with, two high schoolers who never interacted now at the same poetry competition, but now they were reciting from the same author. God, Nancy should have realized how stupid it was to come. This whole mess could have been avoided if she just said no to her mom.

"I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked," he began. His eyes kept wandering to her, confused most likely, but then flicked back down to his feet as he tried to remember his lines. He continued on with the first part of *Howl*, and Nancy was somewhat impressed with his memorization skills.

*Howl* was one of her favorite works, despite poetry not really being her "thing". She liked English a lot and even wanted to be a journalist when she was older, but poetry just always felt odd to her.

When he read it, though, it seemed to highlight all the reasons why

she loved this specific piece. All the right parts were emphasized, and he said it in such a powerful way that really made Nancy shiver, chills running up and down her arms as he spoke.

He didn't take long, but it still exceeded two minutes. The judges didn't seem to care, in fact, they were impressed. Most high schoolers don't get up in front of everyone and recite verbatim *Howl*.

"Very nice," Ms. Clark mentioned from the front. Nancy held her book tighter against her lap, watching as Jonathan walked back to his seat. "*Howl* is a masterpiece."

Jonathan smiled, a bashful little grin, and Nancy thought it was one of the cutest things she'd ever seen. It was definitely out of the blue that she felt that way, but the way his cheeks rose up and his eyes close briefly, she thought everything was going in slow motion for her.

She would have been lying to herself claiming she hadn't realized she never felt that way with Steve.

A few patrons volunteered to perform, none of which put as much emotion into the piece as Jonathan did. For a kid who seemed to prefer isolation, he did have a very moving and passionate voice. Maybe his time alone was spent on reciting poetry to himself. Nancy had to laugh at that.

The Wheeler did not want to be the last person to go, for everyone would remember her that way. Instead, she mustered up the courage and raised her hand to volunteer before two other people in the crowd. The librarian, who was choosing, smiled eagerly. *Fresh meat*.

"You must be one of the newcomers here." Her voice rang sweet, but there was something lingering in her tone that made a kind old woman sound threatening. "What's your name?"

She took a few steps, moving out of her row, before mumbling, "Nancy Wheeler."

"Oh!" a woman from the row behind her exclaimed. "That's Karen's daughter!"

A few of the others followed suit, chuckling over fond memories of how Nancy was *just* a little girl, with bangs and braids and pink colored everything. She was already flustered before she came to the front, fingers twitching together before they grabbed the microphone.

"This poem isn't mine, either." Her voice was somewhat shaky, and only then did she realize that public speaking was not her forte. "It's also from *Howl*." She did everything in her power not to look towards Jonathan in the crowd, but of course, it was hard to pull away her gaze from something she *wanted* to look at.

He tensed up in his seat, pushing his feet back towards himself and pulling his body up against the chair. Jonathan didn't look mad at her but instead intrigued or curious. It was weird that they were both performing a poem, not just from the same author, but from the same piece. Nancy was glad she didn't study the same lines he did, or else then she'd be in a stickier situation.

She began with the second part of the poem, a few lines later than Jonathan ended on. Nancy kept her voice at a steady volume and pace but was sure to emphasize certain lines she felt were necessary. "Carl Solomon!" she began, "I'm with you in Rockland." Continuing through the few lines that she remembered, Nancy was trying her best to put as much into each word as she could.

And by the end, she was out of breath. Maybe it was from nerves causing her to take in less air as she spoke, or perhaps it was just from the performance she gave. It was hard, in front of the adults and Jonathan, and she could feel her legs shaking as she went on. Of course, the judges and audience applauded as they did with everyone, and the librarian gave a nice nod her way.

Nancy took her seat again, waiting for the Poetry Slam to finish and the results to be announced. With a slight glance over towards Jonathan, she realized he was looking back at her. The two exchanged slight smiles, probably awkward for both of them, and the Byers boy turned away.

Once the last person performed, the librarian got to her feet. "We have recorded everyone's scores and determined the winner for tonight's competition. Well, winners."

Stiffening, Nancy lifted her head up to try and see the sheet the librarian held, attempting to read anything she could and determine what score she had.

"Two people gave fantastic performances and have come to the same score of a ten." Nancy was expecting the winners to get tens. Librarians and random townspeople were poor judges and gave the majority of people anything above a seven.

Her hands gripped tighter around the book in her lap, hoping to hear her own name. "Jonathan Byers," the librarian said, "and Nancy Wheeler."

Applause rang out in the audience, and Nancy was happy to hear her own name, but the other winner was Jonathan. What were they supposed to do with the gift? She got up, seeing as Jonathan was as well, and moved towards the front of the room where the librarian held the gift basket.

"I'm not sure how you both want to- "

"She can have the basket," Jonathan interrupted. "I don't need it."

Nancy looked over, wishing she could just speak but couldn't. When the librarian handed her the basket, she took it with flimsy arms. "Thanks," was all she could manage towards Jonathan. The others in the room started to leave, noise levels rising.

Neither of the teens moved from their positions, Jonathan also watching the other adults mingle and take their leave from the building. Nancy glanced over. "So," she began. He turned his head towards her, curious and perhaps confused as to why she was even talking to him. It's not like she ever went up to him in school.

There was that one time when she, Steve, Tommy, and Carol were all hanging out by the lockers and Jonathan was hanging up a poster for his brother's disappearance. The four of them, leaning against the lockers, all watched as he did so.

Tommy was being an asshole, claiming Jonathan was the one who probably killed Will, but Steve was there to shut him up. Despite

being one of the more popular playboys in the school, he still had some respect for others. Of course, Nancy wanted to go over and speak to him, but it was like something was holding her back.

"You like *Howl*?" It sounded much less awkward in her head, but Jonathan's lips raised in a small, almost sad, smile.

"Yeah." He rubbed his hand along the back of his neck, and Nancy swore she saw goosebumps trailing along his arm. The library was cold, much more so than outside, and Nancy beckoned him towards the door while he continued talking. "I'm not much of a poetry person, but I think that one is really great."

Nancy nodded, her interest piqued. He was quite similar to her, especially since he didn't like poetry. "I like English a lot," she admitted, "but I guess I prefer journaling."

"I'm more for photography." His hands fell to his pockets after he opened the door. It was dark outside, with the moon shining brightly on the grass just outside. "I wasn't expecting anyone else from school to come to this. Nobody has for the past few weeks. You did a good job."

Her grip tightened on the basket as she took a few steps down the library stairs. "I was supposed to go to prom," she asserted, "but..." She glanced up towards him and shook her head. Nancy wasn't planning on going into more detail than that. "Thanks for letting me have this." She stretched the basket out, clarifying it was meant for the gift.

"No problem. I don't need any of that stuff anyway."

There was a silence between them as Nancy realized they both stopped moving. Jonathan most likely came in his own car, and Nancy's was parked to the left. His body seemed to be turning, and there was one thing she had left to say to him. "Jonathan?"

He turned back, just his head, but didn't speak. His body language was quizzical, curious to hear what she had to say.

"I'm really sorry about your brother."

Nancy turned as soon as she finished her statement and made her way with fast feet towards the car she drove. Jonathan was left standing in place, frozen, while the Wheeler drove off back to her own house.